

... Then a photographer

by Malcolm McElvaney

I consider myself an observer of my surroundings first and an artist second ... then a photographer third. The camera as a tool is essential to photography but what role does it play in the creative process and maybe a more subtle question is does it hinder the process in any way; therefore, this order I am starting to explore in the overall creative process might have some new insights if thought out further.

“A magical pencil” has yet to be created to do as much for the artist as the camera has evolved to do for the photographer, the more the practitioner is freed from doing the work in between needed steps there is an element of advantage but a loss as well. Visually the act of drawing or taking a picture share some initial stages because the individuals perception of the world is creating a vision to match through a chosen visual medium; however, the degree of skill and ability of said medium begins the difference from this point on. The first camera was big and the photographer was a chemist and artist on another level because start to finish, very time consuming, all the steps was done by muscle memory. The optical basics haven't changed but the camera has become smaller and smarter so that a photographer now can do more and know less technical details at the same time.

What of the that “magical pencil” you may be wondering. The camera in some ways is that very device as the skill to reproduce a scene by drawing it requires a level of knowledge of breaking it down and putting it onto paper. This is accomplished by a pencil that has remained a simple device that when yielded by an artist can produce amazing images. Given the time and practice to become that proficient to do this some creative individuals worked toward the dream of capturing a scene through the optical devices of the time to a permanent medium. The photographer is an artist using a different type of tool to do something the other can't, yet both achieve something as they attempt to capture what they see.

The tools used aid the artist in creating a final visual form a viewer can also potentially appreciate but it does still require the artist to observe their surroundings to find the inspiration in the first place. Once the subject to capture is found then knowing the constraints of your tools becomes a factor in achieving that vision of it. Those who draw have the constraint of having to be more observant and reproducing subtle details that are taken for granted, yet are free to fully engage their imagination and not be bound to reality. Photographers are constrained to the light that exist being brought into the camera through the lens, so the real skill maybe in how to compose the shot to subtract what is not needed. Software has improved to help in the post processing aspects of photography and in as much as they mimicked the dark room of the film camera days

can do so much more, maybe it here that some of these constraints become less of an issue. Be it the camera's abilities or the software's features knowing how to use them and pushing their limits is very helpful in knowing in those initial stages a photograph is conjured up in your head. The complexity of any form of art requires time and practice to achieve the best results, it just varies where the most challenging aspects are in the process. Appreciate what others have achieved but be aware that they have the time and practice behind those results, you will have to build up those skills and measure success or failure against what you can do or attempt to push yourself to try.

Where is this going?

How did I become so entrenched into photography myself? If you are a photographer how did you get into this yourself? Entry into any art form and where it takes you is a vastly complex topic, especially if your goal is teaching new people about it or even more challenging getting them to become photographers as a result. It was in that context of demonstrating what photography is that I started a very interesting quest to do just that; simple enough, but we take for granted so much and equally make so many assumptions that I actually taught myself about myself in the process. It was anything but “simple enough” and what works for me isn't going to work for someone else was a starting point. Long after the need to present anything the process has continued on and the key observation resulting was teaching someone about gear without the desire to observe their surroundings to use it seems counter productive.

My urge to pass on photography being put aside I believe the idea of learning to observe your surroundings, even if only to improve how you see the world, might be a goal in itself. It is no less challenging than being “simple enough” to show what photography is. In truth I would find it hard to go backward in time and learn to master something more complex than I know already, so given the state of cameras today I could easily see those using the cell phone camera seeing my favorite tool the DSLR camera in a similar way. Perhaps this is where as an artist the need for a tool to complete the vision creates the opportunity I would have needed.

After a read through of the above I can sense I define photography from a point of view based on how I personally work and use it, so if a more universal definition exist to be applied that is fine but does illustrate how monumental the task I had set myself.